

# Sacred mysteries

Why the *Rigveda* has resisted decipherment

KAREN THOMSON

The place in literary history of the earliest Indo-European poems remains unrecognized. Composed long before Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, they form an anthology of over 1,000 songs of considerable merit and sophistication, celebrating the power and beauty of the natural world. Traditionally known as the *Rigveda*, these poems, in an archaic and unfamiliar language, were handed down in prehistoric India as a sacred mystery, and ancient assumptions about their subject matter played a vital role in the development of Indian religious thought. Translators, however, still have difficulty making sense of many of them. As with other supposedly religious texts, any challenge to fundamental beliefs is invidious. But I suggest that these important poems continue to appear not to make sense because a significant part of their vocabulary has always been mistranslated.

How and where they were composed is unknown. Believed to be of divine origin, this body of material was passed down by a priestly elite, its incomprehensibility, but highly metrical form and poetic style, making it ideally suited to ritual recitation. Many centuries later it was adopted by the new religion, Hinduism, as its most ancient sacred text.

The language of the *Rigveda* is the earliest surviving form of the Indian branch of the Indo-European family of languages. It is commonly known as Sanskrit, but the language described by the word "Sanskrit" came several hundred years later, and there are considerable differences. Classical Sanskrit is characterized by stylistic peculiarities that make it very different from the ancient languages of Europe, and from the vernacular of these poems. It was a scholarly language, written according to rules laid down by a grammarian, Pāṇini, who flourished some 400 years BC. Like medieval Latin, it was a lingua franca, and had to be studied and mastered. The name Sanskrit, which dates from Pāṇini's time, means "perfected, cultivated", as opposed to Prakrit, "natural, vernacular". Because its form had been prescribed at an early date, Sanskrit was unable to change and develop in the way that natural languages constantly do. Writers resorted to a range of contriv-

ances in an attempt to avoid the exigencies of a grammar that was no longer natural to them. The simple adjectival past participle came to be preferred as a way of representing past tense: not "I led the horse" but "the horse is having-been-led by me". Massive compounds, words strung together in stem form to avoid the necessity for inflection, became the mark of a highly developed literary style. The description of an eminent king at the beginning of the *Pañcatantra*, a collection of fables generally dated to around 300 AD, "his feet were reddened with the mass of rays from the jewels in the crowns of foremost kings", is a single adjective; the king is literally "foremost-king-crown-jewel-ray-mass-reddened-foot-paired". The very length of the compound is honorific. The analysis of such compounds calls for algebraic, rather than linguistic skill. "Classical" Sanskrit, in other words, is a somewhat misleading name. The language of what is regarded as the great period of Sanskrit literature lacks much of the grammatical sophistication that we associate with an ancient classical language.

The language of the *Rigveda*, as the earliest poetry is traditionally known, is very different. It was a rich and varied vernacular, with a wealth of nominal and verbal forms. Like ancient Greek, it had a musical accent, which no longer exists in Classical Sanskrit. Its compounds are of the familiar Homeric kind: "weapon-armed", "lovely-handed". Some of the words in its vocabulary survive into Classical Sanskrit, but a large number are unfamiliar to scholars of the later language. It is as different from Classical Sanskrit as the language of *Beowulf* is from modern English.

The endeavour to "wrench" sense from the text, as Professor Stephanie Jamison recently put it, is itself ancient. The earliest surviving attempt was composed around 500 BC. Its author, Yāska, quotes extensively from the poems, so that we know that they have remained unchanged for well over 2,000 years. He cites an assertion, made by a sceptic named Kautsa, that "the poems of the *Rigveda* have no meaning", which he tries to refute in his study.

Kautsa's opinion demonstrates that knowledge of later Sanskrit is of little help when it comes to understanding the Rigvedic lexicon and its forms, and modern Sanskrit scholars labour under the same difficulties as Kautsa did. Perhaps it is not surprising that pundits continue to echo the beliefs of antiquity about the indecipherability of the *Rigveda*, and to enjoin those who are inclined to its study to develop a taste for obscurity. But a taste for obscurity stands in the way of philological inquiry, and the *Rigveda* is, I suggest, far from indecipherable.

If this ancient text, in a complex early Indo-European vernacular, had been dug up from, say, the Caspian Sea ten years ago, its discovery would have generated considerable excitement. It would have provided an opportunity for ground-breaking research. Scholars would have pored over it, comparing passages, working out straightforward ones first and then applying what they learnt to the more difficult ones, little by little pinning down meanings – in other words, trying to decipher it in the way that texts in unfamiliar languages have always been studied. And by now we would have a fairly good idea of what it meant. But the *Rigveda* has been preserved for us, not by geographical accident, but by tradition.

There is a vast accretion of ancient scholarly material devoted to the *Rigveda*. This was an essential component of the Indian oral tradition. As H. T. Colebrooke had reported to Western readers at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, "it is a received and well-grounded opinion of the learned in India, that no book is altogether safe from changes and interpolations until it have been commented". That commentary then itself had a commentary, and the commentary upon a commentary was for the same reason commented on – studies piled back on back, ever further from the original, like Swift's fleas –

So, naturalists observe, a flea  
Hath smaller fleas that on him prey,  
And these have smaller yet to bite 'em,  
And so proceed *ad infinitum*.

Not only was the text of the *Rigveda* preserved in this way, but assumptions made at a very early date about its subject matter and meaning were also rendered unassailable. Sanskrit scholars today are interested in the history of Indian culture and thought, often describing themselves as Indologists. As the opening sentence of the prospectus to Sanskrit Studies at the University of Oxford makes clear, "Sanskrit is the key to Indian civilisation, and it is in this spirit that it is taught at Oxford". When Indologists come to the consideration of this ancient and venerated text, whose influence on Indian religious thought has been so profound, they inevitably focus on that influence. The text is viewed, as it were, through a telescope backwards. Their translations struggle to make interpretations found in a mass of derivative scripture, known loosely as "the Veda", fit. But it is an impossible task. They don't fit.

Three beliefs are firmly held. The first is that the *Rigveda* is intentionally obscure, "designed to puzzle". The second, which grew out of the first, explains this obfuscation as the secret

encoding of ancient ritual procedure. The third is that the poems are fundamentally indecipherable, and that no satisfactory translation will ever be possible. I believe that all three of these are wrong. But the first two, in discouraging linguistic and critical attention from being paid to the text, help to uphold the third. The faithful transmission of this material, remarkable in the history of ancient literatures, has proved a double-edged sword.

To decipher a text is to discover its meaning. It is only when our translations make sense that we can be confident that we are making progress in decipherment. If our attempts to understand a passage were to lead us, for instance, to the Chomskian "colourless green ideas sleep furiously", we could not be sure that our understanding of any of the words in the sentence was correct. We might reasonably suspect at least four of them of being wrong.

Decipherment refines meaning by the comparison of contexts. Hapax legomena are often doubtful because they appear only once in a text. The more frequently a word occurs, the more likely it is that we will understand it correctly. If, for example, we have a sentence containing an unfamiliar verb, "Mothers [verb] their offspring" a number of possible translations suggest themselves: "adore", "protect" or possibly "indulge". But if the verb occurs again in another context, "We [same verb] the gods with our thoughts" we might feel that "protect" is less likely, and incline to prefer "adore". Another context could suggest a new translation for the word, one that had not previously occurred to us. As Stephen Ullmann stressed in *Semantics: An introduction to the science of meaning* (1962), "The meaning of a word can be ascertained only by studying its use. There is no short cut to meaning, through introspection or any other method. The investigator must start by collecting an adequate sample of contexts and then approach them with an open mind, allowing the meaning or meanings to emerge from the contexts themselves". This was not new; Wittgenstein had said the same in the *Philosophical Investigations*. "How a word functions cannot be guessed at. We must observe its usage and learn from that." But if we begin with the assumption that our text is deliberately puzzling, and characterized by bizarre collocations, decipherment is hamstrung from the start.

These ancient poems, averaging ten verses in length, were composed in a variety of metres whose rhythm is generally iambic in type. I have given the short poem to the wind in parallel text (see right) to show a typical metrical form. The relationship that the poets describe with their surroundings is a sophisticated one. Their poems serve as talismans, ensuring that the natural world will continue to provide welfare and shelter for man. The belief in the power of poetry pervades the *Rigveda*.

They indeed were comrades of the gods,  
Possessed of truth, the poets of old;  
The fathers found the hidden light  
And with effective prayer brought forth the dawn. (VII, 76, 4)

The forces of nature are vividly depicted, and frequently deified. The supreme god is Varuna, whose mysterious laws govern the universe.  
That far off constellation set on high  
That shows itself at night, where does it go by day?

Inviolable are the holy laws of Varuna,  
The shining moon goes radiant by night.  
(I, 24, 10)

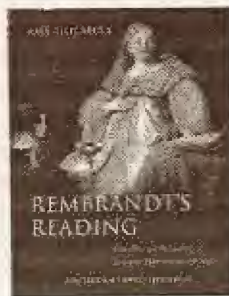


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## COMMENTARY

I have come to the *Rigveda*, not with an interest in primitive myth and ritual, as others have



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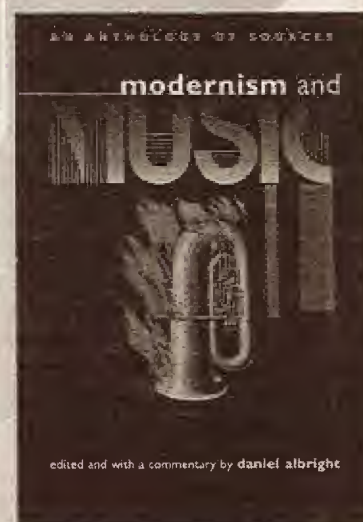
The beauties of these early poems remain hidden from view, like the Maltese Falcon beneath layers of black enamel. But the fact that this remarkable body of material is not yet deciphered has significant repercussions for other disciplines. In 1997, an article by Michael Witzel, Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University, drew on evidence from the text of the *Rigveda* to provide a date for the arrival of the Indo-Aryans into northern India. Referring to recent findings in archaeology which suggest a date for the collapse of the Indus civilization, he concludes, “as the *RV* does not speak of cities but only of ruins (*armaka*), even larger ones, ([*mahā-*] *vailasthāna*), we may suppose that the Indo-Aryans immigrated, or rather, gradually trickled in, tribe by tribe and clan by clan, after

Modern scholarship has reason to be grateful to “the learned in India”, whose attentions have preserved the text of these poems so faithfully. But ancient scholars did not have the resources now available to us, the concordances, the ability to make comparisons with other Indo-European languages. It is time for their guesses about what they contain to be set aside. A fresh approach to the decipherment of this ancient material is urgently needed, and the opportunity for exciting new research remains open.

(X, 186)

And if, Wind, there in your house  
A store of immortality is laid,  
Give some to us, that we may live.

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